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Race and Ethnicity In the Curriculum

16 By Joan C. Elliott

Multiculturalism is becoming a popular slogan of the '90s. Increasing demands from ethnic groups have caused curriculum committees in many institutions to rush to become multicultural, without a thorough understanding of, or commitment to America's cultural diversity. The results have frequently been frustrating and unsuccessful, failing to serve the institutions and the public in general, particularly minority groups. This short essay presents a description of insensitive lingualisms. Also, it identifies instances of racism in the curriculum at the university level, offers a critique of multicultural education, and encourages a need for diversity.

Curriculum committees may use a common term, although it conceivably may appear uncongenial to a certain segment of the student body. For example, terms such as *elitist* and *pop* or *high* and *folk*, cause tension between students and curriculum committees or among committee members. In many minds, elitist and pop represent the division between the races—the rich and the poor, upper and lower class. High culture implies a superior position, while the popular culture is viewed as being inferior. This is true for the term *classical* and *folk*. The use of the term *cultural gap* can cause tension between constituents. Representatives of the high culture use this term when students of the lower economic class have little knowledge of the high culture. It is seldom used when the representatives of the high culture lack interest or knowledge of the popular culture. Representatives of the high culture frequently have little respect for the pop culture, while those interested in the popular culture, often lacking exposure to the high culture, do not take the time to understand it.

The above conflicts present serious considerations for officials of institutions of

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higher education. For example, a curriculum committee with emphasis on the humanities can become a prime target of pressure groups who feel that their culture has been ignored by departmental courses. Failure to be aware of ethnic sensibilities can lead to unpleasant misunderstandings. Minority students accuse English departments throughout the nation of bias and prejudice against them. A prejudiced faculty member can easily give a subjective grade to a student since there is no single way to write a paper. On the other hand, since scientific material demands one correct, precise answer, seldom do minority students accuse science professors of bias or deliberate misclassification of grades.

Beyond the academic confines, literary establishments often are hesitant to acknowledge most Black poets and authors, especially the younger generation. And when one is included in an anthology, he is unusually famous (Alex Haley, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes or Martin Luther King). In the same anthol-

ogy, one may recognize a handful of famous white names out of a hundred unknowns. The omissions include the likes of poet Melvin Tolson, one of the best. The curriculum committees, therefore, must make a conscious effort to include literature by Blacks, Asians and Hispanics in the syllabus.

One of the factors contributing to misconceptions and misinformation surrounding African Americans is the treatment of the female writer. Black women novelists can be nationally known and still not included in popular anthologies (Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks). These authors are almost never taught in most college level American literature courses and rarely mentioned in women's studies courses. Hence, generations of young students, particularly at predominantly white institutions, have been denied the insight and sensitivity of these female writers who happen to be Black.

To remedy the above imbalance, American colleges and universities should have Black Studies, Asian Studies and Latin Studies Departments along with the other fields of study already in place. Blacks, the largest minority in America today, can no longer be ignored by content courses. As for Asian Americans, they are treated at most institutions as if they are invisible. Hispanics, the fastest growing minority in the country, fail to find frequently their heritage and culture in content courses or textbooks.

American history books have for so long ignored the contributions of Black people. But in the last 25 years, most departments of history have found it necessary to revise and add to the curricula. New courses in Black history, especially the Civil War and Reconstruction, which interpret this period more truthfully and realistically, have lessened the tension between minority students and history professors.

In spite of the fact that Blacks have contributed more to American indigenous music than any other group, they continue to struggle for the inclusion of Black music—jazz and blues, for example—in the curriculum departments of music. Only recently has jazz received recognition at a number of institutions. The music departments usually support the music of the high culture and ignore, for the most part, the so-called popular culture. Minority students can indeed get excited about programs at any university if they can identify with some of those programs.

Since the '60s, foreign language departments have come under criticism by some quarters as catering only to the elite. In spite of the fact that Anglophone and Francophone nations exist in Africa, with literary and artistic expressions, American language textbooks, as late as the '60s, fail to mention the cultures of these countries in their courses. But since the '70s, textbooks and the syllabi of foreign language courses include materials from the Anglophone and Francophone nations of Africa. This move has helped diminish the feelings of elitism and racism in the eyes of Black students. Black students now accept more readily some foreign languages, especially French and Spanish.

As in the other fields of the humanities, authors fail to include speeches by Blacks in anthologies on rhetoric. In the '60s, after Martin Luther King came upon the scene, authors began to include his speeches, especially "I Have a Dream," in textbooks as examples of rhetorical strategies. And in the '70s, editors began to include other rhetoricians, such as Jesse Jackson, H. Rap Brown, Malcolm X and Vernon Jordan in anthologies.

An issue which most committees must deal with is the awareness of ethnic groups on the campus. On predominantly white campuses, Western European cultural representatives are heard and read repeated-

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ly. For the most part, white researchers, authors and artists are represented in the curriculum. Because of the residue of prejudice, Asian, Hispanic and Black students must encourage the departments on predominantly white campuses to include more of their groups in its programs. If a college is predominantly Black, it must consider its white counterparts on predominantly white, Native American Indian, Asian and Hispanic campuses.

At universities where sports programs are seen as more important than academic programs, less interest is shown and meager funds are provided for ethnic courses. Concerns about the budget seem to override most considerations in the discussions of the Black Studies, Women's Studies, Asian Studies, Latin Studies or Native American Studies. The result is that the question of the budget becomes paramount in planning every curriculum.

Unfortunately, selling the ethnic studies by the numbers draws attention away from the intellectual and content of multicultur-

alism; away from the fact that the great things of the human spirit don't need numbers to validate them. Advocates seem to have forgotten that a nation's culture is the aggregate of the knowledge, skill and understanding possessed by each individual, not the sum of money spent, people served, or events held.

The curriculum committee at any university or college has a challenge every time it makes a choice. And the materials which are not chosen must not always be those of the so-called ethnic origin. Also, administrators must be mindful of the truth that the United States is not a melting pot, but represents many representatives of different cultures who wish to remain part of their own cultural identity.

The college or university should encourage administrators to develop a multicultural curricula, demonstrate an institution-wide commitment to diversity and equality and train faculty and staff in cross cultural understanding.

Race and ethnicity, two of the touchiest issues in American life, have become an increasing source of friction and inspiration at all levels of the American educational system. But America has always been a multicultural and multiracial society. Everybody needs to keep this fact in mind. □

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